

ADVANCING RESEARCH • IMPROVING EDUCATION

# SEDL Letter

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A photograph of a man with curly brown hair and a green t-shirt crouching next to a young boy with brown hair wearing a blue t-shirt. They are both looking down at a stream with large, smooth, light-colored rocks. The man is smiling and pointing towards the water. The boy is focused on something in the water. The background is a lush green field with tall grass and some wildflowers.

Afterschool,  
Family, *and*  
Community



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# Afterschool, Family, & Community Increasing Student Success Beyond the School Day



**E**ven if it doesn't take a village to rear a child, it may take a village to raise academic achievement. In recent years, researchers have published numerous studies identifying family and community involvement as important factors in student success. Researchers have also been scrutinizing afterschool programs. They have suggested that well-implemented programs can have a positive impact on kids—academically, socially, and emotionally.

In light of these findings, we have devoted this issue of *SEDL Letter* to topics centered around afterschool and family and community involvement. We focus on the research, presenting a summary of two systematic reviews—one on afterschool and one on parent involvement—and a summary of a research synthesis on afterschool programs, originally published by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). In the synthesis, HFRP discusses the importance of having well-prepared staff working in afterschool programs. This has been a primary focus of SEDL's work as the lead organization for the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning, so we also include an article that discusses the Partnership's approach to staff development.

Because family involvement has proved so important to student outcomes, the U.S. Department of Education has ramped up its support of the Parental Information & Resource Centers (PIRCs) nationwide. In 2006, SEDL and partners—the Harvard Family Research Project and the Miko Group—were awarded a contract to serve as the national coordination center for the PIRCs. In this issue, we have included an article about the PIRC program, looking at how the work and influence of the centers has changed in recent years.

Two other articles in the issue feature examples of how family members and community organizations work with schools in Austin, Texas. Finally, because homework help often has a prominent role in afterschool programs and because it is often the vehicle for parent involvement, we present an article on homework. Written by national homework expert, Dr. Harris Cooper, the article discusses how homework supports student learning and recent research around homework.

As you prepare for the new school year, we hope you will keep in mind the crucial roles that afterschool programs and family and community members can play in improving student achievement. With all of us working together, improved student outcomes can become a reality.

# What Rigorous Research and Reviews Tell Us

## *Impacts of Afterschool Programs and Parent Involvement on Student Outcomes*



**S**ystematic reviews are becoming more important in the field of the education. These rigorous reviews are especially important in areas such as afterschool or parent involvement where there are a limited number of stringent experimental or quasi-experimental studies and where there are mixed findings.

Long used in the field of medicine, systematic reviews are scientific investigations in themselves. The reviews identify, assess, and synthesize all relevant studies in order to answer a question or set of questions. Unlike traditional reviews, systematic reviews aim to minimize bias in locating, selecting, coding, and aggregating data from individual studies. They allow for more accurate assessments of the effectiveness of an intervention and evidence of knowledge gaps in the research literature. Because the reviews are looking at particular interventions, the studies included in the reviews are generally experimental or quasi-experimental research designs.

Here we summarize the findings of two systematic reviews—one focused on afterschool programs; the

other on parent involvement. The reviews may be found online on the Campbell Collaboration Web site. The Campbell Collaboration is an international network of social scientists committed to producing, maintaining, and disseminating systematic reviews of research evidence on the effectiveness of social interventions. Currently there are three Campbell Collaboration coordinating groups: crime and justice, education, and social welfare.

### Impacts of Afterschool Programs

In 2006, a systematic review was completed on afterschool programs. “Impacts of After-School Programs on Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review for the Campbell Collaboration” by Susan Goerlich Zief, Sherri Lauver, and Rebecca A. Maynard may be viewed in its entirety at [http://www.sfi.dk/graphics/Campbell/reviews/afterschool\\_review.pdf](http://www.sfi.dk/graphics/Campbell/reviews/afterschool_review.pdf). What follows is a brief review of their work.

Zief, Lauver, and Maynard’s systematic review was guided by three questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways does access to afterschool programs impact student context (i.e., student location, supervision, and safety), participation in enriching activities, behaviors, social and emotional development, and academic outcomes for youth?
2. Do the effects of after-school programs vary among subgroups of youth defined by their baseline characteristics?
3. Among the program models and settings evaluated, do some seem more beneficial to youth than others? What are the distinguishing characteristics of those more and less successful programs?

The authors included only well-implemented experimental design studies due to strong evidence documenting the unreliability and in some cases bias of recent quasi-experimental studies. They also developed a formal approach to assess the quality of the relevant experimental design studies identified.

Four specific standards needed to be met for a study's inclusion:

1. No specific evidence of control group contamination
2. Neither overall study attrition or differential attrition would bias the impact estimates
3. Appropriate statistical measures were used for the analyses
4. Primary impact analyses were conducted on all available sample members at followup

After reviewing 88 studies, five were included in the review (see sidebar). The impact estimates presented by these studies were analyzed in two ways, including meta-analysis, although incongruent measures between the studies limited the possibilities for meta-analysis. Ninety-seven different outcomes were measured by the five studies and 79 percent of those were measured by only one study out of the five. All five evaluated programs that operated in urban, school-based environments and served primarily low-income minority students in low-performing schools. Three of the five studies were of programs intended to reduce negative behaviors such as delinquency and drug use. All five included activities to promote positive outcomes such as

academic growth and exposure to enrichment activities. The programs also used a similar mix of activities that included academic support and recreational activities.

### Systematic Review Findings to the Three Research Questions

The programs each had a different emphasis on promoting positive behaviors and reducing negative ones. However, the authors did not find that any one approach was more or less effective at contributing to "improved behavioral outcomes or other estimated effects." The authors also noted that the studies reviewed "provide no evidence that any one program model is more effective at changing students' context or improving academic outcomes."

The authors found that standardized reading test scores showed that the programs reviewed did not contribute to higher reading achievement for participants, but that afterschool programs may have more of an impact on raising grades, although impacts were small and not statistically significant.

Looking at the 97 outcomes measured by the five studies included in the review revealed that 84 percent showed no significant differences between the program and control youth. The authors explained these null impacts could be a function of limited duration of the intervention or the relatively low participation rates across studies. They also said that the null impacts could suggest that similar afterschool programs "may not be an effective means to achieve the outcomes that afterschool programs in theory hold such promise to impact."

The authors conclude that this systematic review can be a guide for the conduct of a systematic review and analysis of like programs and evaluations, and a benchmark from which future afterschool program efforts can begin. It also helped identify the knowledge that is lacking and what should be done to gain that knowledge. Their suggestions included rigorously testing alternative models, promoting replication of experimental design studies, and extending the data collection so that longer-term impacts of afterschool programs are studied.

### Effects of Parent Involvement on Academic Performance

Chad Nye, Herb Turner, and Jamie Schwartz are authors of the systematic review, "Approaches to Parent Involvement for Improving the Academic Performance of Elementary School Age Children," available online at <http://www.sfi.dk/sw43574.asp>.

Nye, Turner, and Schwartz note that quantitative evidence on the effect of parent involvement on

## Studies Included in the Afterschool Systematic Review

### 21st Century Community Learning Centers

U. S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary. (2003). *When schools stay open late: The national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, first year findings*. Washington, D.C.: author.

### Maryland After-School Community Grant Program: Program 21

Weisman, S. A., Soule, D. A., Womer, S. C. & Gottfredson, D. C. (2001). *Maryland After-School Community Grant Program: Report on the 1999-2000 school year evaluation of the phase I after-school programs*. College Park, MD: University of Maryland.

### Maryland After-School Community Grant Program: Program 17

Weisman, S. A., Soule, D. A., Womer, S. C. & Gottfredson, D. C. (2001). *Maryland After-School Community Grant Program: Report on the 1999-2000 school year evaluation of the phase I after-school programs*. College Park, MD: University of Maryland.

### Maryland After-School Community Grant Program: Program 4

Weisman, S. A., Soule, D. A., Womer, S. C. & Gottfredson, D. C. (2001). *Maryland After-School Community Grant Program: Report on the 1999-2000 school year evaluation of the phase I after-school programs*. College Park, MD: University of Maryland.

### Cooke Middle School After-School Recreation Program, Philadelphia, PA

Lauver, S. C. (2002). *Assessing the benefits of an after-school program for urban youth: An impact and process evaluation*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.



student achievement has been mixed since 1966, when an evaluation of the Head Start Program focused on outcomes related to parent involvement. That evaluation suggested a “substantial relationship” between the parent’s involvement and their child’s academic success. The authors note that discrepancies across parent involvement studies can be explained by the nature of data collection and research design. In some cases, the discrepancies are related to the outcomes measured—such as the effects of parent involvement on reading achievement or math achievement. Another problem centers around how parent involvement is defined; in some studies it is so broadly defined that it is difficult to understand how to consistently measure it.

For the review, the authors defined parent involvement as “the active engagement of a parent with their child outside of the school day in an activity which centers on enhancing academic performance.” They limited their review to randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies with the following intervention characteristics: 1) parent involvement with their child in academic support activities outside of school (for example, reading or completing supplemental math problems with the child), and 2) parent involvement for a minimum of 20 days. The authors included 18 RCTs in their review, all published between 1964 and 2000. About two thirds of the studies were dissertations. The length of the parent intervention programs ranged from 4 to 104 weeks; the most frequently reported method of parent involvement was collaborative reading. All but one study was conducted in public schools—that particular study did not indicate what type of school was involved. Of the studies that reported socioeconomic status (SES) of the parents, 73% were from mixed SES, 9% from middle SES, and 18% were from lower SES. Of those that reported ethnicity, 25% were African American, 25% were Caucasian, and 50% were of mixed ethnicities.

For the meta-analysis, the first question addressed was general: “Does parent involvement result in an improvement in children’s academic performance?” The analysis suggests that parent involvement programs of the kind reviewed have a positive and significant effect on student achievement and that the effect has remained unchanged for three decades.

Then the researchers looked at specific effects of parent involvement. Parent involvement had a positive and significant effect on children’s reading performance. The results for math were also positive and significant but the authors believed the result was biased by one study, which produced an effect size that was three times as large as the effect size for



any other study. When they removed that study from the analysis, the impact of parent involvement was still positive, but not statistically significant.

The authors also wanted to determine the parent involvement intervention program that produced the largest effect. Three program approaches were identified:

- Collaborative reading – Parents and children read together as a structured activity.
- Education and training – A specific program designed to provide parents with appropriate teaching or skills-based activities, materials, or information to be used with their child outside the school day.
- Parent rewards and incentives – Parents provide rewards or incentives to their child outside the school day for their child’s performance in school.

Nye, Turner, and Schwartz found that reward and incentives produced the largest impact on children’s academic performance, followed by education and training.

The authors concluded that there is a need to improve the quality of RCTs on parent involvement and a need to replicate high-quality RCTs they reviewed that produced unusually large and significant effects. They also cautioned that although their review indicated positive and significant effects measured immediately following an intervention program, there is little evidence with regard to the sustainability of the effects.

*Parent involvement had a positive and significant effect on children’s reading performance.*

# Afterschool Programs Make a Difference

## *Findings From the Harvard Family Research Project*

*A recent study showed significant gains in math test scores for students who participated in high-quality afterschool programs.*

In February, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) published *After School Programs in the 21st Century: Their Potential and What It Takes to Achieve It* (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008), a brief that summarizes 10 years of research on afterschool programs and discusses implications for the future. Featured in the brief are studies that evaluate large afterschool programs with experimental or quasi-experimental designs. The authors, Priscilla M. D. Little, Christopher B. Wimer, and Heather B. Weiss, drew on those evaluations to address two primary questions: 1) Does participation in after school programs make a difference, and, if so, 2) What conditions appear to be necessary to achieve positive results? In this article, we summarize their findings and discuss the characteristics of programs leading to positive student outcomes.

### Does participation in afterschool programs make a difference?

According to Little, Wimer, and Weiss,

The short answer is yes. . . . A decade of research and evaluation studies, as well as large-scale, rigorously conducted syntheses looking across many research and evaluation studies, confirms that children and youth who participate in after school programs can reap a host of positive benefits in a number of interrelated outcome areas—academic, social/emotional, prevention, and health and wellness. (2008, p. 2)

#### Academic Achievement

Afterschool programs can have an impact on academic achievement. Improved test scores are reported in evaluations of The After-School Corporation (TASC) programs in New York City (Reisner, White, Birmingham, & Welsh, 2001; White, Reisner, Welsh, & Russell, 2001) and in Foundations, Inc. elementary school programs (Klein & Bolus, 2002). A more recent longitudinal study showed significant gains in math test scores for elementary

and middle-school students who participated in high-quality afterschool programs (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007), and a meta-analysis of 35 studies of at-risk youth found that out-of-school time programs had a positive effect on reading and math achievement (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006).

The HFRP brief emphasizes that many studies “repeatedly underscore the impact of supporting a range of positive learning outcomes, including academic achievement, by affording children and youth opportunities to learn and practice new skills through hands-on, experiential learning,” (p. 3) citing evaluations of Citizen Schools (Espino, Fabiano, & Pearson, 2004; Fabiano, Pearson, & Williams, 2005) and of LA’s BEST (Huang, Coordt, La Torre, Leon, Miyoshi, & Pérez, et al., 2007), among others. These programs not only offered academic support to improve academic performance, but also combined it with other enrichment activities to achieve positive academic outcomes. Little, Wimer, and Weiss noted,

Thus, extra time for academics by itself may be necessary but may not be sufficient to improve academic outcomes. Balancing academic support with a variety of engaging, fun, and structured extracurricular or cocurricular activities that promote youth development in a variety of real-world contexts appears to support and improve academic performance. (2008, p. 4)

#### Social and Emotional Development

Programs with a strong intentional focus on improving social and personal skills were found to improve students’ self-esteem and self-confidence (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Examples include Go Grrls, an Arizona program of structured group sessions that helps improve girls’ body image, assertiveness, self-efficacy, and self-liking (LeCroy, 2003) and mentoring programs such as Across Ages (Taylor, LoSciuto, Fox, & Hilbert, 1999), which pairs older adults with students.

#### Prevention of Risky Behaviors

The hours after school, between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., offer opportunities for juvenile crime, sexual activity, and other risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use. Research and evaluation studies have shown that

Download the HFRP brief at  
<http://www.hfrp.org/afterschoolinthe21stcentury/>

participation in afterschool programs have a positive impact on juvenile crime and help reduce pregnancies, teen sex, and boys' marijuana use (Goldschmidt, Huang, & Chinen, 2007; Philliber, Kaye, & Herrling, 2001; Philliber, Kaye, Herrling, & West, 2002).

### Health and Wellness

The afterschool setting presents an opportunity to address the growing problem of obesity among children and youth. Research has shown that afterschool programs can contribute to healthy lifestyles and increased knowledge about exercise and nutrition. Girlfriends for KEEPS (Story, et al., 2003) and the Medical College of Georgia's FitKid program (Yin, Gutin, Johnson, Hanes, Moore, Cavnar, et al., 2005) are two such programs that benefit their participants; similar results are reported in a longitudinal study of more than 650 students who participated in 25 Connecticut afterschool programs (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005).

### What conditions appear to be necessary to achieve positive results?

Little, Wimer, and Weiss wrote that while afterschool programs "have the potential to impact a range of positive learning and development outcomes," some programs do not maximize this potential. They identified the following three factors as critical to achieving positive youth outcomes:

- Access to and sustained participation in the program
- Quality programming and staffing
- Strong partnerships among the program and other places where students are learning, such as their schools, their homes, and other community institutions

### Access to and Sustained Participation in the Program

The HFRP brief discussed a number of research syntheses (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002; Simpkins-Chaput, Little, & Weiss, 2004) and evaluations such as those of the After School Matters program in Chicago (Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007), Louisiana's 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) program (Jenner & Jenner, 2004), and LA's Best (Huang, et al., 2007) that show that students experience greater gains if they participate regularly in afterschool programs, with greater frequency (more days per week), and in a sustained manner over a number of years.

Much like gaps among students in regular day

school, Little, Wimer, and Weiss noted differences among students whose families have higher incomes and more education and those students whose families are less advantaged. They wrote (p. 6) that students whose families have higher incomes and more education:

- Are more likely to participate in afterschool activities
- Do so with greater frequency during the week
- Participate in a greater number of different activities within the week or month
- Are more likely to participate in enrichment programs, whereas disadvantaged students are more likely to participate in tutoring programs

### Quality Programming and Staffing

According to Little, Wimer, and Weiss, research on the quality of afterschool programs is mostly descriptive, with only "a handful of rigorously designed studies." They have drawn from a set of studies they describe as "a small but powerful set of studies."

Regarding program structure and supervision, Little, Wimer, and Weiss (p. 6) conclude, "Without the structure and supervision of focused and intentional programming, youth participants in after school programs, at best, can fail to achieve positive outcomes and, at worst, can begin to perform worse than their peers" (Vandell, Pierce, Brown, Lee, Bolt, & Dadisman, 2006; Pearson, Russell, & Reisner, 2007). They continue, "In fact, some research finds that when youth are concentrated together without appropriate structure and supervision, problematic behavior follows, suggesting that focused, intentional activities with appropriate structure and supervision are necessary to keep youth on an upward trajectory and out of trouble" (Jacob & Lefgren, 2003).

In a meta-analysis of the impact of 73 afterschool programs, Durlak and Weissburg (2007) found that programs missing any of the following four characteristics did not achieve positive results:

- Sequenced – Used sequenced set of activities designed to achieve skill development objectives
- Active – Used active forms of learning to help students develop skills
- Focused – Devoted program components to developing personal or social skills
- Explicit – Targeted explicit personal or social skills

Other studies (Gerstenblith, Soule, Gottfredson, Lu, Kellstrom, Womer, et al., 2005; Arbreton, Goldsmith, & Sheldon, 2005) found that programs with structured and focused, well-organized activities foster engagement and facilitate high-quality learning opportunities.

### About the Studies Included in HFRP Brief

According to lead author Priscilla Little, the authors of the brief did not do an exhaustive review of all studies available or conduct a systematic review, but rather took a "seminal studies" approach to examine and include those studies which best represented a range of outcomes, practices, and settings. The set of studies was then reviewed by leading researchers in the field who validated that this set was indeed representative of the wealth of available information.



*Strong  
partnerships  
are more than  
a component  
of program  
quality. . .*

According to Little, Wimer, and Weiss, the quality of a program's staff is one of the most critical features of a high-quality afterschool program. A follow-up study to the TASC evaluation found that positive relationships were found in sites where staff modeled positive behavior, actively promoted student mastery of the skills or concepts presented in activities, listened attentively to participants, frequently provided individualized feedback and guidance during activities, and established clear expectations for mature, respectful peer interactions (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005). Other research found that in low-quality programs, the staff "engaged in negative and punitive interactions with youth" instead of "engaging in supportive behavior and practicing positive behavior management techniques" (Vandell, Shumow, & Posner, 2005; Gerstenblith, et al., 2005).

### Strong Partnerships

Little, Wimer, and Weiss also found:

Programs are more likely to exhibit high quality when they effectively develop, utilize, and leverage partnerships with a variety of stakeholders like families, schools, and communities. However, strong partnerships are more than a component of program quality: they are becoming a nonnegotiable element of supporting learning and development across all the contexts in which children learn and develop. (p. 8)

### After School in the 21st Century

Little, Wimer, and Weiss summarize:

The research and evaluation studies and syntheses highlighted in this brief demonstrate how complex a task it is to provide high-quality, effective supports for youth and their families, but they also provide powerful evidence that after school programs do work when key factors are addressed—factors of access, sustained participation, program quality and strong partnerships. (p. 10)

They also conclude that the research and evaluation results from the past decade raise the following important questions about the future of afterschool programs and their role:

- *Moving forward, how can the research-based practices known to be effective in after school programs be adopted more broadly within after school programs and other expanded learning models?*
- *How can after school programs work with schools, families, and other community and health supports to ensure a complementary array of learning and developmental supports across the day, the year, and the developmental continuum from kindergarten through high school?*
- *Moving forward, how can and should "success" of after school programs be measured, particularly as the field moves toward greater emphasis on shared responsibility and partnerships?*
- *How can choice be built into after school and extended day options to ensure that programs are responsive to the needs of working families and youth participants alike?*

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# *SEDL's Afterschool Work Deepens with* California Demonstration Program

**W**ith more than 400,000 students served by afterschool programs in California, the State of California has good reason to focus on the quality of its afterschool programs. The California Department of Education contracted with SEDL to provide research and professional development in the California After School Demonstration Program (CASDP). This 3-year project is part of the state's technical support system for afterschool programs.

SEDL assisted the California Department of Education to establish high-quality standards, based on research, to use in the selection of 10 demonstration programs. When the 10 programs are announced, SEDL will provide professional development and technical assistance around issues such as quality, training, and continuous learning. In turn, the demonstration programs will provide similar professional development and assistance to other afterschool programs throughout the state.

Project director Zena Rudo explains that another task of the demonstration program is to collect data from the sites to help increase understanding of promising practices in afterschool. SEDL will help promote these promising practices in California and nationwide.

Rudo says this pilot project is developmental and collaborative in nature. "CDE has asked us to not only work with the demonstration programs, but also with the department, the afterschool regional leads in the state and other stakeholders to develop this model for quality technical support for afterschool." This developmental approach is new, not only for California but for the field of afterschool. Rudo noted, "California has shown enormous support for afterschool across the state and SEDL is excited to be a part of it."





# Professional Development *in the Afterschool Environment*

By Christine Moses

The afterschool environment is diverse in program needs, instructor experience, and anticipated outcomes. According to a recent survey conducted by SEDL's National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning at 54 promising afterschool sites around the country, 75% of afterschool instructors have a bachelor's or master's degree and 72% have at least 3 years of afterschool experience. These sites have demonstrated a positive effect on student achievement. There are approximately 8,000 other sites, however, that may not have the same level of resources and experience available. Professional development can have a large and lasting impact on these sites—if it is done correctly.

High-quality professional development activities are intentionally designed to increase knowledge, skills, understanding, and/or performance. Research shows that “sit-and-get” sessions—where an audience patiently sits and listens to an instructor for a few hours one day—are not effective in changing instructor behavior, instructor attitudes, or student performance (NSDC, 2001). Because 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLCs) and other afterschool programs are often evaluated on the basis of student outcomes, high-quality professional development for afterschool professionals is becoming increasingly necessary.

“Professional development is much more than attending a conference once a year,” said Catherine Jordan, who directs the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning. “Effective professional development is well-planned, systematic, job-embedded, and continuous and has intentional outcomes that advance the understanding and performance of program staff. It is essential to improving the overall afterschool environment.”

Jordan explained this to more than 20 participants at a 3-day professional development workshop hosted by SEDL in June. The workshops, one of six that will be held throughout the summer and fall, are produced by the National Partnership for the U.S. Department of Education's Technical Assistance and Professional Development program for 21st CCLCs.

SEDL staff, along with staff from Learning Point Associates and the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, presented the 3 days of training based on the National Partnerships' Afterschool Training Toolkit, an online professional development tool. Developed over the past 4 years, the toolkit demonstrates how to use promising

## Select Afterschool Resources

National Staff Development Council  
[www.nsdc.org](http://www.nsdc.org)

Afterschool Training Toolkit  
[www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits](http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits)

National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning  
[www.sedl.org/afterschool](http://www.sedl.org/afterschool)

Promising Practices in Afterschool  
[www.afterschool.org](http://www.afterschool.org)

Beyond the Bell  
[www.beyondthebell.org](http://www.beyondthebell.org)

National Association of Elementary School Principals,  
Leading After-School Communities: What Principals Should  
Know and Be Able to Do  
[www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org)



## Staff Development 15 Minutes at a Time

When it comes to professional development, one of the most common complaints from afterschool leaders is that they don't have the time or money for training. While it may be tempting to abandon professional development, a well-trained staff can have greater success in offering activities that will improve student achievement. Instead of sending your staff to a conference, consider using free or inexpensive resources and devoting just 15 minutes a week during a staff meeting to professional development. What follows are examples of how you can use the Afterschool Training Toolkit for professional development on academic enrichment in afterschool. Each activity below can be done in 15 minutes. All you need is a computer with Internet access.

### Explore the Afterschool Training Toolkit.

Reprinted from *AfterWords*, the newsletter of the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education

Show your staff the toolkit at [www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits](http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits). The toolkit has six content areas: literacy, math, science, the arts, technology, and homework help. Each content area includes the following components: information about the role the subject plays in afterschool, promising practices, sample lessons, and resources and references. After your staff has spent some time exploring the toolkit, ask them to explain the components.

### Learn about promising practices.

Promising practices are teaching techniques used in afterschool programs with evidence suggesting they help students learn important academic content. Watch a video demonstrating a promising practice with your staff and ask them to discuss what they saw. They can also spend some time reading about the practice on the Web site. Ask your staff how they can incorporate the practice into existing lessons.

### Teach a lesson.

Ask your staff to select a sample lesson they would like to teach and discuss the parts of the lesson. Talk about what they need to implement it. Staff should teach the lesson to their students and be prepared to report back on their experiences.

### Talk about what you learned.

Ask staff to give feedback on how their lessons went, what worked and didn't work, and what they would do differently. Revisit the promising practice and parts of the lesson. Do their existing lessons have these components? What changes could they make to these lessons to make them more effective?

practices to build students' academic skills through fun and engaging activities. Material in the toolkit is based on current afterschool and content-area research.

"The toolkit is awesome," said Corinne Taylor, an evaluator at the New Mexico Public Education Department and a workshop participant. "The videos in the toolkit make the professional development real for my teachers and instructors."

According to Deborah Donnelly, product coordinator for the National Partnership, the 20 videos produced for the toolkit provide the link between theory and practice that is often missing from other forms of professional development. As 21st CCLC site coordinators, directors, or instructors, participants will take what they learned

at the workshop back to either their state or their program.

"We were able to apply what we learned about professional development during the first day and a half to working with the homework content within the toolkit," said Frances Jones of the Region XII Technical Assistance Center in Weslaco, Texas. "This is going to help me integrate my staff development training into small, manageable sessions."

One of the strategies discussed extensively at the workshop is the ability to provide high-quality professional development in 15-minute chunks at staff meetings and department meetings.

"The toolkit allows instructors to learn teaching strategies, access lesson plans, and see for themselves how their instruction can change over time," said





**Left: Jackie Rudat of Indiana, and Frances Jones of Texas discuss their respective programs.**



**Right: Corinne Taylor of the New Mexico Public Education Department participates in a discussion at the 3-day professional development workshop hosted by SEDL in June.**

Donnelly. “It is the driving force as to why we created the toolkit. We know how difficult it can be to schedule professional development that is developed specifically for afterschool professionals.”

Jordan agreed. “According to our research, frontline staff rarely have the opportunity to receive high-quality professional development. If instructors use the toolkit in a systematic way in small chunks, then we know that high-quality professional development is being provided,” she said.

Providing professional development to afterschool professionals is an increasing trend that the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) embraces. Joellen Killion, NSDC deputy executive director, explained that now that afterschool programs are beginning to be linked to day-school programs, it is critical for afterschool professionals to understand the difference between afterschool and day-school curricula.

“We want to increase the capacity of our afterschool professionals in terms of academic outcomes, but we also want to ensure that the emotional, behavioral, social, physical, and creative aspects of children are developed and supported in afterschool settings,” Killion said. “No one wants to do more worksheets after the school day is over. Afterschool is a time for creative learning and enrichment, and that takes different skill sets.”

Another focal point of the workshop was demonstrating how all instructors, program directors, and professional development providers have opportunities to become leaders in their

afterschool environments. This was one of the goals in creating the toolkit. Because the toolkit is online, any staff member can lead professional development sessions through facilitating discussions, presenting material, coaching, or consulting.

“Our mission for these professional development sessions is to really demonstrate how the toolkit can be used to provide afterschool practitioners with research-based professional development that enables them to increase their credibility with day-school programs while improving the academic performance of their students,” said Jordan.

## Reference

National Staff Development Council with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. (2001). *National Staff Development Council standards for staff development*. Revised edition. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

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# USDE's Parental Information and Resource Center (PIRC) Program Works to Boost Parent Involvement and Achievement

By Leslie Blair

Effectively engaging parents and families in the education of their children has the potential to bring about school change and improvement in ways that other reform strategies cannot. And that belief is at the heart of the Parental Information and Resource Center (PIRC) program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE).

The PIRC program, first funded in 1995, now ensures that each state has at least one PIRC and that the PIRCs each play a statewide role in coordinating and fostering successful and effective parental involvement policies, programs, and activities to improve student academic achievement and strengthen partnerships between parents, schools, and communities. Seven outcomes have been identified for the PIRC program: improved home-school communication, increased student achievement, increased school academic achievement, increased parent involvement in school planning, increased parent involvement in school review, increased parent involvement in school improvement, and increased school readiness.



## Find Your State PIRC

PIRCs are located in every state in the U.S., District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories. Five states—California, Colorado, Florida, Missouri, and New York—have two PIRCs each. To learn about the PIRC in your state, visit <http://www.nationalpirc.org/directory/>

The PIRC program had an initial goal of getting parents involved in their children's early education—from birth to age 5. Ten years later, some states had one PIRC, 18 states and the District of Columbia had multiple centers, and 10 states had none. The PIRCs offered widely different services. However, with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act came the need for parents to get more information about school choice, supplemental services, and other accountability issues. Beginning with the 2006-11 grant cycle, the USDE saw the need to create a more cohesive system of PIRCs and wanted to ensure that all PIRCs had sound information to provide to parents, especially about parent rights, supplemental services, and parent choice. Thus the plan for a National PIRC Coordination Center was born. In 2006, SEDL, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), and the Miko Group partnered to serve as the Coordination Center, bringing to the PIRC program a strong research and evaluation focus as well as many



years' experience in family involvement and professional development.

The first step in the Coordination Center's technical assistance was to help the PIRCs become more strategic in their evaluation efforts, in meeting legislative requirements, and in showing the impact of their programs. The Center has used regional institutes to provide assistance and foster collaborative learning among the PIRC directors and evaluators.

Much of the Coordination Center's early work was to orient new PIRCs. Many of the PIRCs that received funding for the 2006-11 grant cycle were new to the federal PIRC program—in fact almost half of the 60 PIRCs operating the first year of that cycle were new. New to the program or previous grantees, it hasn't mattered, said Lacy Wood, SEDL project director for the Coordination Center. "All of the PIRCs have been committed to continuous learning and improvement to advance their programs, services, and evaluations. They also began to form partnerships that would help them expand their role as statewide leaders and resource providers in parent involvement."

Now that most of the PIRCs have been operating nearly 2 years under the new grant cycle, the program is embarking on what Wood refers to as a "new era." The PIRCs are all strategically working to become statewide leaders and technical assistance centers, leveraging and building on existing family involvement efforts in their states or territories.

Sue Ferguson, director of the National Coalition for Parent Involvement Education, who works closely with the PIRCs has noticed that change. "The PIRCs are all about relationships. Each of them is different because their states are different, but I see them being more consistent across states." Ferguson feels now that the PIRCs are "here to stay" and "growing in strength."

Overseeing the entire PIRC program is Patricia Kilby-Robb, a veteran of several federal education programs and school reform initiatives and a

## The Role of the National PIRC Coordination Center

The Coordination Center plays a central role to

- Guide PIRCs through all stages of the evaluation process and help them to internalize and institutionalize the process
- Assist PIRCs in the reporting and use of their data
- Synthesize learning across the PIRCs
- Support PIRC management capacity and service delivery
- Provide access to research-based materials and effective practices

former education research consultant and principal. As national PIRC expert and contract officer's representative for the Coordination Center, Kilby-Robb emphasizes the importance of the need for high-quality PIRC products and services and, most important, rigorous evaluation to guide the PIRCs' work.

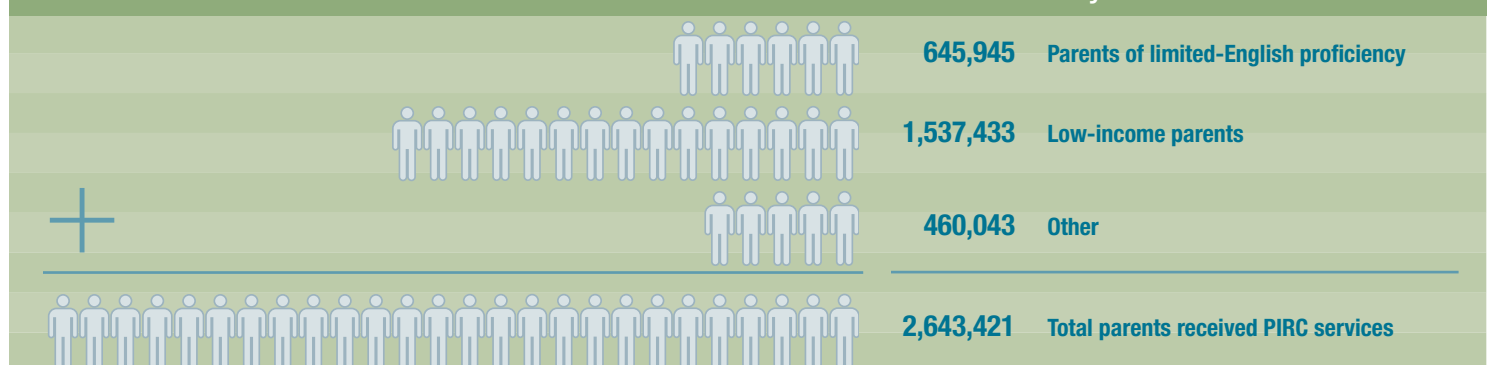
She said, "We want to have a sound body of evidence at the end of 5 years that will address the benefits and outcomes of the PIRC program, while encouraging all PIRCs to use evaluation in an ongoing way that continuously informs and improves their work."

She also noted that the experience of SEDL and the Harvard Family Research Project in research and evaluation are assets to the PIRC program. Already, the technical assistance provided by the National PIRC Coordination Center with emphasis on best practices and evaluation has made a difference in the PIRC program. Twenty-seven of the PIRCs now have in place evaluation processes that are experimental or quasi-experimental in nature. Most of these 27 are focusing on both student-level and parent-level outcomes. Some of the specific evaluations focus on child development outcomes such as early literacy, parent knowledge and skills that support student learning, parent and child attitudes and perceptions toward school, and parent involvement that supports student learning.

## PIRCs Distribute Information

A recent evaluation of the PIRC program has shown that more than 1 million parents nationwide have received PIRC newsletters; 2 million parents have received training materials, and 13 million people were reached through mass media efforts just during the first year of the grant cycle.

## Number of Parents Who Received PIRC Services in Year 1 of Current Grant Cycle



PIRC Priorities

USDE has established the following four priorities for PIRC program implementation:	<b>Early childhood parent education</b> – Spend at least 30 percent of funds each year to establish, expand or operate Parents as Teachers programs, Home Instruction for Preschool Youngsters programs, or other early childhood parent education programs.	<b>Statewide impact</b> – Use broad statewide strategies to provide parents across the state, particularly parents who are educationally or economically disadvantaged with services that enhance their ability to participate effectively in their child’s education, including their ability to communicate effectively with public school personnel in the school that their child attends.	<b>Understanding state and local report cards, public school choice, and supplemental educational services</b> – Provide activities that effectively assist parents in understanding state and local report cards under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and, in cases where their child attends a school identified as in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under Title I, in understanding their options for public school choice or supplemental educational services.	<b>Technical assistance in the implementation of local educational agency (LEA) and school parental involvement policies under Section 1118 of the ESEA</b> – Offer technical assistance to support LEA and school parental involvement policies under Title I of the ESEA in order to improve academic achievement and school performance.
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Ann Henderson, a senior consultant with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform—who has devoted much of her career in education policy to family involvement issues—says this type of evaluation needed from the PIRCs. “We need more good data on engaging parents and improving student achievement. People don’t seem to collect it so much nor over the longer term—there just hasn’t been the funding for it,” she said.

Henderson has worked with a number of PIRCs including ones in Washington, D.C., Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Virginia and she has worked in combination with the state departments and PIRCs in Wisconsin and West Virginia. She said, “Regarding the PIRCs that I’ve worked with recently, I’ve found a strong determination not just to carry out a respectable program, but have a strong impact, and I see real interest in developing parent leadership which is extremely important investment to make.”

Henderson noted that developing parent leadership involves more than just telling parents how to help kids at home, but includes skills that help parents become advocates for their kids at school and help other parents get involved. These parent leadership skills enable parents to recognize good work and learning for their child’s grade level and help them create a situation of accountability at the school, she said.

Kilby-Robb agrees. “I get excited all the time because I see the changes being made,” she said. “I’ve seen parents in both rural and urban areas becoming more aware of what their rights are and what their opportunities are. Before, they may have been

involved in their children’s schools, gone to PTA meetings and back-to-school night. Now parents are becoming more knowledgeable about the law [NCLB] and how it relates to them.”

Kilby-Robb is also pleased with progress made reaching out to all parents—no matter what socio-economic background or language they speak. Many of the PIRCs provide training materials in multiple languages, including Spanish, Haitian, and Hmong. Others have worked to communicate with hard-to-reach parents by using public service announcements, radio talk shows, and segments on television. Others have hired bilingual staff members and provided translators at school meetings. Another PIRC has used AT&T language to identify and translate languages other than English over the phone.

Key to this diversity of offerings is each PIRC’s advisory board. “The PIRC boards have become essential for looking at state issues around parent involvement,” said Kilby-Robb. “They try to find solutions to meet the needs of parents within the state and are helping to make sure the PIRCs are positioning themselves to coordinate federal, state, and local parent involvement activities.”

The high-quality technical assistance with regard to best practices and evaluation provided by the National PIRC Coordination Center is not only helping the PIRCs reach new levels of progress, but strengthening the parent involvement field as well. “SEDL and the Harvard Family Research Project will have a tremendous impact on parental involvement work for years to come,” said Kilby-Robb.

*Leslie Blair is a project director in SEDL’s communications department and the editor of SEDL Letter. You may reach Leslie by emailing [leslie.blair@sedl.org](mailto:leslie.blair@sedl.org).*

# Austin's Maplewood Elementary

## *Relies on Parents as Partners for Afterschool*

By Jubilee Guequierre

*Jubilee Guequierre is a freelance writer and mother of three who lives in Austin, Texas.*

The small portable classroom at Maplewood Elementary resounds with giggles and shrieks as a few dozen students prepare to perform in the school's annual Cinco De Mayo celebration. The girls and boys, students in Monica Alvizo's afterschool class, have spent one afternoon a week all semester learning the dance steps of Ballet Folklorico, a traditional form of Mexican dance. Helping the girls with their blue eye shadow and long yarn braids is Mrs. Alvizo, an office clerk at the school whose son is in the fourth grade there. The room is full of parents—tying up skirts, applying bright lipstick, and straightening the pantyhose of wiggly kindergartners. When the curtain rises on the small cafeteria stage, the parents join the rest of the school to watch the children stomp and spin across the stage like vibrant flowers to the familiar beat of “La Negra.”

Maplewood is a small, diverse, urban elementary school, serving an eclectic community in east Austin. Community members play a large role at Maplewood: local musicians volunteer to play classical piano during lunchtime, neighbors help with school gardens, and perhaps most important, parents and community groups supply the long-running afterschool program with talented and enthusiastic teachers, often taking time off work to participate.

Mrs. Alvizo has been teaching afterschool classes at Maplewood for 7 years. The steps she teaches the children are the traditional routines she learned as a high school student. “I’m not a professional dancer, but I enjoy doing this because the children motivate me and they keep me inspired. Every year at the beginning of the school year, students approach me in the hallways or come by the office to ask when I will teach the Ballet Folklorico class.”

The Maplewood afterschool program has been running for 17 years, most recently with primary funding from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which will end after the 2008-09 school year. This past school year, the program enrolled 178 students.

Rosemary Salazar, the program's director, has been involved from the very beginning. “A long time ago when I approached parents to teach—we have so many parents with expertise they can share—they were hesitant because they have never taught or didn't know how to ‘behavior manage’ the students and felt a little intimidated. I convinced a few parents to sit in with teachers instructing an afterschool class and before you know it, they were saying things like “I can do this” or “If the class can be under 12 students, I can teach a class,” or “If I can have the younger/older kids, I can teach a class.”

Mrs. Salazar works hard to involve parents in other ways. In addition to the extensive classes offered to the students, Maplewood offers adult education classes such as yoga, knitting, and ESL. During “Fit Family Fun Night,” parents can earn credits for free babysitting during “Parent's Night Out.”

The variety of programs and opportunities for parent involvement are important in a school with such a diverse mix of families and backgrounds. Parents whose work schedules conflict with PTA meetings or who experience language barriers are given many alternate ways to become involved. Whether they're participating in quilting, ukulele, robotics, mural painting, soccer, or traditional Mexican dance, the students and the community that surrounds them are expanding their horizons and adding to their educational experience—after the school bell rings.

**Maplewood afterschool students get ready for their Ballet Folklorico performance.**





# “Teacher, Mira Mis Plantas!”

By Suzanne Hurley

One week before the end of school, when most teachers would find it challenging to keep their students’ attention, veteran teacher Alexandra Mendoza has no such problem. Her second graders eagerly wait their turn to sample one of the tomatoes they just picked from the vegetable garden outside their classroom. After eating the golf ball-sized red and yellow tomatoes, many students ask to take some home. One second grader wants “one for mami, one for dad, and one for baby brother.” Because of the bountiful harvest, Mendoza is happy to send the students home with tomatoes, green beans, and cucumbers.

Mendoza teaches at Metz Elementary in Austin, Texas. Her garden is a collaboration between her class and Green Corn Project (GCP), an Austin nonprofit that installs organic food gardens for families and individuals in need as well as for schools and community centers. Since 1998, GCP has installed more than 150 organic food gardens throughout central Texas. The organization focuses its efforts on underserved areas of the capital city, where people often lack access to fresh and affordable organic vegetables.

Five years ago, GCP decided to expand its efforts beyond backyard gardens into schoolyards in the same underserved areas. The goal for the expansion was two-fold: (1) to introduce students at a young age to the benefits of fresh vegetables and the joy of gardening, and (2) to have the students teach their parents about these benefits. GCP currently supports 25 garden beds at 16 area schools.

“We’re trying to educate central Texans about how to grow organic food gardens, so it just makes sense to start with the kids,” explains executive director Meagan O’Donnell. “The students love it. They go home and share their gardening knowledge—and their vegetables—with their families.”

In 2005, GCP garden coordinator Wayne Kamin approached the teachers at Metz Elementary with the idea of putting in a garden. Metz fits GCP’s criteria for inclusion: 94% of the students are economically disadvantaged, and two thirds are classified as “at risk.” Mendoza embraced the idea. She had already been gardening with her classes for a few years, but her students were often frustrated with the slow pace of the garden installation. With no adults to help her prepare the bed, Mendoza found it taking at least 1 month to get the garden ready for planting. Her students were always asking, “When do we get to plant?”



With GCP’s help, Mendoza is now able to plant right away with her students. On weekend “dig-in days,” GCP volunteers spend about 4 hours preparing the school’s garden. The volunteers double dig the bed—a labor-intensive method of loosening and aerating the soil that allows roots to grow deeper and access water more easily. Double digging is part of the biointensive method that GCP employs. This method, which also includes the use of compost, the hexagonal spacing of plants, and companion planting—placing plants that grow well together near each other—creates gardens that yield large harvests. It requires less maintenance and water than traditionally dug gardens. For school gardens like the one at Metz, the volunteers double dig the bed, add compost, and leave starter plants and seeds for the teachers to plant with their students (for the family and individual gardens, GCP volunteers help the garden recipients plant the starters and seeds).

GCP volunteers return to the school at the start of each growing season—in March and September—to refurbish the bed, add more compost, and drop off more starter vegetables and seeds. Through volunteer mentors, the organization also offers gardening advice throughout the season.

Mendoza has also recruited her own volunteers for the garden building. Last summer, Austin’s unusually high rainfall turned the garden area into a jungle. Her students’ parents came with their machetes to the dig-in and quickly cleared the area. Mendoza has also asked other teachers, including her fellow second-grade teacher Eva Rosenthal, to help expand the garden area. This fall the school’s courtyard will have four GCP beds, two for the second graders and two for the third graders, as well as a butterfly garden to attract monarch butterflies on their annual migration.

The students learn about far more than gardening by working in the beds. Mendoza and Rosenthal use the gardens to teach the students about math, science, and biology. For example, the students must

*Suzanne Hurley is a board member of Green Corn Project (GCP) and a freelance writer. GCP is a volunteer-driven organization, with only one part-time employee. For more information about GCP, visit the organization’s Web site at [www.greencornproject.org](http://www.greencornproject.org).*

use math to divide up the garden bed. They measure the bed using irregular measurement tools, like links and cubes, and then move on to using inches and centimeters. GCP beds are normally 4 feet by 12.5 feet; 4 feet is about how far the arms of an 8-year-old can reach into a bed without stepping in it and compacting the soil or plants. Once the students have measured out 1 square foot, that area becomes their individual garden space where they plant beans and melon.

“Some of the plants are for us—we take them to our families. The other squares are for the other class,” explains second grader Francesca. “We share with the kindergarteners.”

The second graders also teach the kindergarteners what they’ve learned about gardening. Vicky, Isaac, and Nelsy advise, “Don’t rip the leaves off. Don’t step on the plants. Be really careful with them,” while Carmen, Dulce, and Daisy suggest, “Have fun! Take care of the plants. Give them water.” Francesca and Isabel offer information that even some experienced gardeners and vegetable eaters might need to know: “Some tomatoes are yellow, but the red ones have to be really red.”

In addition to science and math, gardening provides the Metz second graders with a lesson in language. More than 96% of the school’s students are Hispanic, and 44% have limited English proficiency. Through gardening, however, they learn that coliflor is “cauliflower” in English. As they learn about the difference between good bugs and bad bugs, they learn the names of bug body parts in both English and Spanish. And along with discovering that empanadas taste better when made from fresh homegrown (or is it school-grown?) vegetables, they learn that the word “empanadas” is the same in both languages.

Moreover, Mendoza and Rosenthal have seen their students become enthusiastic fruit and vegetable eaters. The children love picking and eating the vegetables they have grown and sharing their harvest with other students and their families.

In the end, GCP is happy to support school gardening efforts. Kamin said, “The garden knowledge lasts longer than when the students are in school; it lasts more broadly. When the students help put a seed in the ground, see it sprout, see it bud, see it bloom, and see it fruit, it expands their awareness and makes a difference.”

GCP takes its name from an American Indian celebration designed to secure the blessing of the Great Spirit for a bountiful crop. Like the ceremony, GCP works to spread hope by teaching people of all ages skills that can be used for self-empowerment and self-reliance for years to come.



Alexandra Mendoza teaches her students at Metz Elementary math, science, and language skills while they work in the garden.





# Does Homework Improve Academic Achievement?

## *If So, How Much Is Best?*

By Harris Cooper, PhD

The beginning of a new school year brings with it a reawakening of an old debate regarding the value of homework. Parents who feel their children are overburdened with homework are pitted against educators pressed to improve achievement test scores. According to two recent polls, however, the majority of parents remain satisfied with educators' homework practices.

A poll conducted for the Associated Press in January 2006 found that about 57% of parents felt their child was assigned about the right amount of homework. Another 23% thought it was too

little, and 19% thought it was too much. A survey conducted by MetLife in 2007 found that 87% of parents saw that helping their child with homework was an opportunity for them to talk and spend time together. More than three fourths (78%) did not think homework interfered with family time, and nearly as many (71%) thought that it was not a source of major stress.

Educators should be thrilled with these numbers. Pleasing a majority of parents regarding homework is about as good as they can hope for, even with a fair number of dissenters.

### What the Research Says

But opinions cannot tell us whether homework works; only research can. My colleagues and I analyzed dozens of homework studies conducted between 1987 and 2003 to examine whether homework is beneficial and what amount of homework is appropriate for our children (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006).

The homework question is best answered by comparing students assigned homework with students assigned no homework who are similar in other ways. The results of such studies suggest that homework can improve students' scores on the class tests that come at the end of a topic. Students assigned homework in second grade did better on the math tests; third and fourth graders did better on English skills and vocabulary tests; fifth graders on social studies tests; ninth through 12th graders on American history tests; and 12th graders on Shakespeare tests. Across five studies, the average student who did homework had a higher unit test score than the students not doing homework.

However, 35 less rigorous (correlational) studies suggest little or no relationship between homework and achievement for elementary school students. The average correlation between time spent on homework and achievement was substantial for secondary school students, but for elementary school students, it hovered around no relationship at all.

Why might that be? Younger children have less developed study habits and are less able to tune out





distractions at home. Studies also suggest that young students who are struggling in school take more time to complete homework assignments simply because these assignments are more difficult for them.

## How Much Homework?

So, how much homework should students do? The National Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association have a parents' guide called *Helping Your Child Get the Most Out of Homework*. It states, "Most educators agree that for children in grades K–2, homework is more effective when it does not exceed 10–20 minutes each day; older children, in grades 3–6, can handle 30–60 minutes a day; in junior and senior high, the amount of homework will vary by subject."

Many school district policies state that high school students should expect about 30 minutes of homework for each academic course they take (a bit more for honors or advanced placement courses).

These recommendations are consistent with the conclusions reached by our analysis. Practice assignments do improve scores on class tests at all grade levels. A little amount of homework may help elementary school students build study habits. Homework for junior high students appears to reach the point of diminishing returns after about 90 minutes a night. For high school students, the positive line continues to climb until between 90 minutes and 2.5 hours of homework a night, after which returns diminish (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006).

## Keeping It Balanced

Beyond achievement, proponents of homework argue that it can have many other beneficial effects. They claim it can help students develop good study habits so they are ready to grow as their cognitive capacities mature. It can help students recognize that learning can occur at home as well as at school. It can foster independent learning and responsible character traits. And it can give parents an opportunity to see what's going on at school and let them express positive attitudes toward achievement.

Opponents of homework counter that it can also have negative effects. They argue it can lead to boredom with schoolwork because all activities remain interesting only for so long. It can deny students access to leisure activities that also teach important life skills. Parents can get too involved in homework—pressuring their child and confusing him or her by using different instructional techniques than the teacher.

### Abstract

## *Does Homework Improve Academic Achievement? A Synthesis of Research, 1987–2003*

In this article, the authors summarize research conducted in the United States since 1987 on the effects of homework. Studies are grouped into four research designs. The authors found that all studies, regardless of type, had design flaws. However, both within and across design types, there was generally consistent evidence for a positive influence of homework on achievement. Studies that reported simple homework-achievement correlations revealed evidence that a stronger correlation existed in grades 7–12 than in grades K–6 and when students, rather than parents, reported time on homework. No strong evidence was found for an association between the homework-achievement link and the outcome measure (grades as opposed to standardized tests) or the subject matter (reading as opposed to math). On the basis of these results and others, the authors suggest future research.

### Source:

Cooper, H., Robinson, J. C., & Patall, E. A. (2006). Does homework improve academic achievement? A synthesis of research, 1987–2003. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(1), 1–62.

My feeling is that homework policies should prescribe amounts of homework consistent with the research evidence, but they should also give individual schools and teachers some flexibility to take into account the unique needs and circumstances of their students and families. In general, teachers should avoid either extreme.

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*Harris Cooper is a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, where he also directs the Program in Education, and author of The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents (Corwin Press). He is also a member of the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning's steering committee.*

# SEDL Contributes to Civic Index

## *that Measures Factors to Support & Sustain Quality Public Schools*

**S**EDL is one of eight organizations to partner with the Public Education Network (PEN) to develop the newly released online Civic Index for Quality Public Education, <http://www.civicindex4education.org>.

Funded by the MetLife Foundation, the Civic Index assesses 10 categories of community support that are critical factors outside the school needed to support and sustain quality public schools. In conjunction with the Civic Index, PEN released results of a national poll it conducted that measures public attitudes toward education and assesses the ten categories of community support.

The poll reveals that even when other issues are seizing the day, Americans still care deeply about education. Top concerns included gas prices (22 percent) and jobs and the economy (19 percent), followed by education (12 percent). Six in 10 Americans say that candidates for office are focusing too little on education in election campaigns this year. “Americans care about their schools, but they are not hearing enough about schools and not seeing the changes they would like,” said Wendy Puriefoy, president of PEN. “The poll reveals that, as a result, Americans are losing confidence in local and national efforts to improve schools and in the elected and public officials who are in charge of making change happen.”

The online Index provides instructions for communities to administer the poll and interpret results. The index was field-tested across West Virginia in 2006 and two communities—San Francisco, and Paterson, New Jersey—have already conducted the Civic Index this year. Sibyl Jackson, president of MetLife Foundation said, “The goal is to

encourage community leaders and organizations and stakeholders to look under the hood of their counties, cities, towns, and neighborhood to see what aspects of their support for quality schools needs fine-tuning, and work better together to help schools succeed.”

SEDL program associate Chris Ferguson, who wrote much of the copy describing the categories and suggested strategies, said, “In the last 10 years, we have seen greater interest and more demand for establishing well-designed community, family, and school connections. As a nation, we have begun to take to heart the idea of ‘it takes a village.’ For the first time, we have a comprehensive tool that allows us to understand the strengths and weakness in how our school communities address education, and most important, what we do to make those communities event stronger.”

Ferguson explained that the Index, “truly allows the user to collect data, analyze data, explore research and best practice, and determine appropriate strategies for the community context. It is a systemic approach to ensure that every child has a quality education.”

SEDL web administrator Brian Litke also worked on the project. Working with storyboard content provided by Ferguson, he supervised a graphic designer who developed an animated, web-based introduction to the Civic Index. Litke also programmed the data-saving mechanisms that allow each user’s data to be saved while they are viewing the introduction.

The research-based index was developed over the past several years in consultation with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland and a range of other social scientists and national experts drawn from more than 30 national organizations.

Other partners who worked on development of the Civic Index include Collaborative Communications Group, Commerce Lane, CommunicationWorks, Gallup University, Lake Research Partners, National Center for Learning and Citizenship, and Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

### About Public Education Network

Public Education Network (PEN) is a national association of local education funds and individuals working to advance public school reform in low-income communities across our country. PEN believes an active, vocal constituency is the key to ensuring that every child, in every community, benefits from a quality public education. To learn more about PEN, visit <http://www.publiceducation.org>.

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## **Award-Winning Online Afterschool Training Toolkit**

This toolkit is designed by the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning for the U.S. Department of Education to give afterschool program directors and instructors the resources they need to build fun, innovative, and academically enriching activities that not only engage students but also extend their knowledge in new ways and increase academic achievement.

[www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/](http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/)

*“By collaborating and sharing what we know about engaging the family and community, we can help schools make good decisions about their involvement programs so that such efforts make a difference to those who matter most — our children.”*

Catherine Jordan,  
SEDL program manager  
Afterschool, Family, and  
Community Program

## **From the the Afterschool Training Toolkit Short Videos of Promising Practices in Afterschool**

Produced by WGBH Educational Foundation, the award-winning short videos on this DVD are taken from the online Afterschool Training Toolkit developed by the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning for the U.S. Department of Education. The videos illustrate promising practices in six key areas: arts, homework help, literacy, math, science, and technology. Afterschool staff can use these videos to explore new ways to embed academics into fun afterschool activities.

For more information go to  
[www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/](http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/)



# National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning Wins Twice



**A**fterWords, the e-newsletter of the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning, which is funded by the US Department of Education and based at SEDL, is now an award winner. AfterWords received the Association of Educational Publisher's (AEP) Distinguished Achievement Award in the E-newsletter, Adult Learning category.

Laura Shankland, SEDL communications associate and AfterWords editor, and Shaila Abdullah, SEDL media design associate, accepted the award Friday, June 6, at the AEP awards banquet.

Catherine Jordan, director of the National Partnership, said, "We're so excited that AfterWords was recognized by AEP for its informative content and accessible, friendly design. We know the newsletter has been well-received by

afterschool programs around the country, so this is the icing on the cake to receive the AEP's prestigious award."

For more than 40 years, the AEP Awards have recognized significant and excellent achievement in educational products and education marketing. AEP received about 1,000 entries this year in the Distinguished Achievement Award and Beacon Award competitions. The Wall Street Journal and WestEd were finalists in the E-newsletter, Adult Learning category along with the National Partnership.

The National Partnership began publishing AfterWords in January 2007 to educate readers about professional development and other strategies that help create high-quality afterschool programs and to provide a forum for afterschool staff to share success stories. Besides Shankland and Abdullah, SEDL program assistant Wendy Jones and SEDL communications associate Debbie Ritenour contribute regularly to AfterWords.

The recent AEP award hasn't been the only win for the National Partnership. In February, partner WGBH Educational Foundation won a highly acclaimed CINE Golden Eagle Award for video production on the Toolkit for Afterschool Learning.

The Golden Eagle Awards recognize excellence in documentary and informational film and video production and have been awarded annually since 1957. Recipients of CINE Golden Eagles include Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Barbara Kopple, Charles Guggenheim, Ken Burns, Martin Scorsese, Ron Howard, Robert Zemeckis, Mike Nichols, Robert Altman, Spike Lee, Mel Brooks and many others distinguished for their work with film and video.

The three winning videos from the Toolkit were "Rehearsing The Tempest," "Integrating Science Across the Curriculum," and "Investigating Science Through Inquiry." Cynthia McKeown, video producer at WGBH, worked with associate producer Jayne Sportelli, editors Karen Silverstein and Mary-Kate Shea, and executive producer Amy Tonkonogy worked to create all the videos for the site. McKeown says, "It is an honor to be recognized by CINE with a Golden Eagle Award, and it is also very gratifying to know that the Partnership's important work in promoting promising practices in afterschool is being honored as well."

Congratulations to all involved on these award-winning products.

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